

Meaning in a material world

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This paper will hold the ways in which meaning is handled in the writings of established linguists such as Wolfgang Dressler (1985), Steven Pinker (1998), and H.G. Widdowson (2004) against views held within the community of cognitive scientists, particularly by Daniel Dennett (e.g. 1993) and Douglas Hofstadter (e.g. Dennett & Hofstadter 1980). It will be shown that from the point of view of the latter, the former are all tacitly committing versions of what has come to be known as the “Cartesian Fallacy”, i.e. the view, rarely explicitly stated except in John Searle’s (1980) famous (or notorious) Chinese Room experiment, that deep within (or ‘behind’) the physiological machinery which human mind–brains represent, there exist infinitely small centres of awareness, or “selves” by whom the essences of sensual impressions or cognitive contents are perceived in a subjective but pure, immaterial way. Since it is believed that neither Dressler, nor Pinker or Widdowson would consciously adopt the dualist stance on the mind–body problem that seems to inform their linguistic theorising, an attempt will be made to discuss, how much of established linguistic ways of handling meaning can be saved, if a radically monist and materialist view on the form–meaning relationship is taken. I hope to be able to show that the prospects for such a reconciliation are better than it might appear.

References

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